

September 19, 2005: NORTON CAUTIONS ON MIXED MESSAGES FOR NATION AND REGION FROM KATRINA TRIP

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NATION AND REGION FROM KATRINA TRIP Washington, DC-- Fresh from a whirlwind congressional tour of the Gulf region both on the ground, by Black Hawk Helicopter and by plane, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) said that the Katrina disaster has compelling messages for every U.S. jurisdiction, but that "it is important not to over-learn messages such as mass evacuations of residents, from this great, but unusual natural disaster." She said that few jurisdictions, including the District, are likely to confront a calamity requiring the evacuation of an entire population of one million residents, forcing depopulation for huge sections indefinitely, and necessitating the rebuilding of an entire economy. Norton was one of 16 Members from three different committees who visited the downtown and waterfront areas of New Orleans, Louisiana and traveled to Waveland and the town of Stennis, both in Hancock County, Mississippi. The Members traveled close to the ground by helicopter to view the 17th Street Levee, the French Quarter and three parishes: St. Bernard, Orleans, and Jefferson, and the Gulfport region. The delegation was taken by helicopter to the Iwo Jima aircraft carrier where they were briefed by Governor Kathleen Blanco, Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen, who was given the federal authority after FEMA's Michael Brown was relieved, New Orleans National Guard Lieutenant General Russel Honore, and local parish officials. Mayor Ray Nagin was visiting some of the states where evacuees from New Orleans were being housed and not available to meet with the congressional delegation.

Norton said the Gulf areas of Mississippi were just as destroyed as New Orleans, although they were 10 miles or more from the water, with houses and commercial structures leveled by wind and water in piles of rubbish, rather than left standing in water as in New Orleans. She said that officials and some residents she visited in New Orleans and Hancock County, MS were living in tents and were considered fortunate to have the privacy of tents, and that she was particularly moved by a free supermarket and a clinic opened under tents in Waveland, MS, and by the will and the determination she saw to rebuild in both Louisiana and Mississippi.

Norton said she was particularly concerned that before the National Capital Region has learned the stay-in-place lesson, the District and other jurisdictions are already focusing residents on evacuation, according to testimony she heard from the District and other officials around the country at a Government Reform hearing last week. She said that while such plans are necessary, what she saw in New Orleans and the Gulf region was more like a wholesale nuclear attack on an entire area than a terrorist attack on structures or transportation.

However, she noted that, a biochemical or radiological attack here is certainly conceivable and that if a HAZMAT tank traveling by rail through the District were attacked, entire sections of the District and region might need to be evacuated. Norton and several members are sponsoring a bill for re-routing and other strategies to avoid a region-wide hazardous disaster because tens of thousands would be killed within a half hour and evacuation would only expose many more who were not initially contaminated.

Norton said that the Gulf region is virtually unique because it must rebuild and repopulate an entire vital area of the country and do everything--from cleaning an oil spill that Vice Admiral Allen, likened to the Alaska Exxon Valdez spill to literally rebuilding hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses.

Norton said, "Katrina was combination of a Noah's Ark flood and a hurricane that can teach us the ABCs of natural and terrorist disasters from prevention to recovery. But we must pick those aspects that are most applicable to each jurisdiction rather than seize this disaster wholesale as a model to work from." For example, she said that it would be impossible during a weekday to evacuate two million federal and other suburban workers and 600,000 D.C. residents at the same time.

Norton said the greatest issue facing the federal government goes far beyond following through on the huge sums needed for rebuilding. "The issue will be enormously complicated by the necessity to use local residents who want to come back to rebuild their own city; to respect federalism, including the powers of state, county and city officials to guide rebuilding; and to assure that billions of federal dollars will be fully accounted for." Parish leaders in Louisiana complained about the displacement of local workers with outside contractors from other states. "Putting the rules down in writing, up front, by legislation, memorandum of understanding or in some other form will be necessary at a minimum to avoid the jurisdictional confusion we are already seeing in the Gulf region," Norton said. Levee, the French Quarter and three parishes: St. Bernard, Orleans, and Jefferson, and the Gulfport region. The delegation was taken by helicopter to the Iwo Jima aircraft carrier where they were briefed by Governor Kathleen Blanco, Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen, who was given the federal authority after FEMA's Michael Brown was relieved, New Orleans National Guard Lieutenant General Russel Honore, and local parish officials. Mayor Ray Nagin was visiting some of the states where evacuees from New Orleans were being housed and not available to meet with the

congressional delegation. Norton said the Gulf areas of Mississippi were just as destroyed as New Orleans, although they were 10 miles or more from the water, with houses and commercial structures leveled by wind and water in piles of rubbish, rather than left standing in water as in New Orleans. She said that officials and some residents she visited in New Orleans and Hancock County, MS were living in tents and were considered fortunate to have the privacy of tents, and that she was particularly moved by a free supermarket and a clinic opened under tents in Waveland, MS, and by the will and the determination she saw to rebuild in both Louisiana and Mississippi. Norton said she was particularly concerned that before the National Capital Region has learned the stay-in-place lesson, the District and other jurisdictions are already focusing residents on evacuation, according to testimony she heard from the District and other officials around the county at a Government Reform hearing last week. She said that while such plans are necessary, what she saw in New Orleans and the Gulf region was more like a wholesale nuclear attack on an entire area than a terrorist attack on structures or transportation. However, she noted that, a biochemical or radiological attack here is certainly conceivable and that if a HAZMAT tank traveling by rail through the District were attacked, entire sections of the District and region might need to be evacuated. Norton and several members are sponsoring a bill for re-routing and other strategies to avoid a region-wide hazardous disaster because tens of thousands would be killed within a half hour and evacuation would only expose many more who were not initially contaminated. Norton said that the Gulf region is virtually unique because it must rebuild and repopulate an entire vital area of the country and do everything--from cleaning an oil spill that Vice Admiral Allen, likened to the Alaska Exxon Valdez spill to literally rebuilding hundreds of thousands of homes and businesses. Norton said, "Katrina was combination of a Noah's Ark flood and a hurricane that can teach us the ABCs of natural and terrorist disasters from prevention to recovery. But we must pick those aspects that are most applicable to each jurisdiction rather than seize this disaster wholesale as a model to work from." For example, she said that it would be impossible during a weekday to evacuate two million federal and other suburban workers and 600,000 D.C. residents at the same time. Norton said the greatest issue facing the federal government goes far beyond following through on the huge sums needed for rebuilding. "The issue will be enormously complicated by the necessity to use local residents who want to come back to rebuild their own city; to respect federalism, including the powers of state, county and city officials to guide rebuilding; and to assure that billions of federal dollars will be fully accounted for." Parish leaders in Louisiana complained about the displacement of local workers with outside contractors from other states. "Putting the rules down in writing, up front, by legislation, memorandum of understanding or in some other form will be necessary at a minimum to avoid the jurisdictional confusion we are already seeing in the Gulf region," Norton said.

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